



Luck o' the Irish

With passion, dedication and a little bit of luck, Bonnie Ehre made her dream of opening her own Irish shop a reality over 15 years ago. Today, Accents of Ireland is a successful business in the Utica suburb of New Hartford, with a well-known reputation for imported Irish sweaters, handcrafted jewelry, crystal and china.

Although Bonnie had no previous retail experience, she knew she wanted to create a store that would combine her love of everything Irish with a business where her family could work together.

In 1991, Bonnie and her daughter Kim attended an eight week entrepreneurial assistance training class taught by Dr. Patricia Laino at the Business Training Institute, home to the Women's Business Center of New York State. "That class really helped me walk into owning my own business with my eyes open," praised Bonnie, as she showed off her dog-eared copy of the workshop manual.

Together with Dr. Laino, Bonnie researched demographic statistics to learn if the demand for Irish goods could be cultivated in the Mohawk Valley. There were no Irish shops in the surrounding area, so Bonnie was traveling into uncharted waters.

"I remember thinking, 'Are we really doing this?' and then in walked our very first customer. I can still remember her face," Bonnie mused - and the customers have continued to shop at Accents of Ireland ever since.

New small business owners often struggle with many challenges in the first year of operation. When Bonnie Ehre learned she had colon cancer only three months after opening her business, she knew she had to rely on her family for support. Bonnie's daughters Valerie, Kim and Melanie worked full time to help out. Fortunately, Bonnie is in remission and Accents of Ireland continues to thrive.

Roughly 85% of all goods in the store come directly from Ireland; the balance is made in the United States, with a good selection of merchandise made locally. Importing goods takes special considerations and can increase the cost of merchandise. "People know the quality of materials and craftsmanship in an Irish sweater before they even walk in the door," commented Bonnie.

Five years ago, Bonnie invested in the future of Accents of Ireland with an SBA backed loan from Bank of America to purchase additional inventory and upgrade tracking systems. “I knew there was a better way I could track what sold and what didn’t. The store made the transition from handwritten receipts and the old-fashioned cash register to the computer age. I now have a great tool to help me run my business,” said Bonnie.

Bonnie helped start the Great American Irish Festival, now the 4th largest Irish festival in the U. S. held annually in July at the Frankfort Fairgrounds. “Irish people are extremely proud of their heritage and this festival is more than a celebration,” she explains. “GAIF has raised enough money to purchase land to build an Irish cultural center in Utica that will host Irish language classes, dance workshops, history lectures, and more.”

St. Patrick’s Day is a day when everyone is a little Irish and many people turn to Accents of Ireland to find just the right item to help them celebrate. But don’t plan to shop there until the afternoon, “We don’t open until noon on St. Patrick’s Day so we can watch the parade as a family,” added Bonnie with a sparkle in her eye.